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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001817

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [MOPS](#) [YM](#) [DOMESTIC](#) [POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: ZAYDIS PERCEIVE PERSECUTION AS ROYG CRACKS DOWN ON DISSENT

REF: A. SANAA 1723

[B](#). SANAA 2498

[C](#). SANAA 144

Classified By: CDA Nabeel Khoury for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. With the second Saada conflict in a year between the ROYG and the "Shabab al-Moumineen" (Believing Youth), continuing to simmer in its third month, President Saleh is reportedly increasing efforts to silence prominent opposition parties and critics. Recently these actions targeted several persons either linked or sympathetic to the Zaydi-Shi'a of Yemen. (Ref. A). Yemeni intellectuals point out that this is beginning to create the perception on the street that there is a targeted campaign against the Zaydis. End Summary.

Saleh Exploits Insurgency to Attack Opponents

[1](#)2. (C) The strength of the 2004 Saada uprising caught the regime by surprise, leaving Saleh extremely sensitive to criticism of his handling of the crisis. During the first three months of fighting (June - September 2004) the opposition, press, international community and Yemeni public remained largely in the dark on the situation in Saada. Major opposition figures complained publicly about ROYG secrecy on a matter of national importance and called for a peaceful end to the conflict. Many opposition journalists who criticized Saleh during the ongoing battle were accused and some prosecuted by the regime for supporting the rebellion. (Ref. B).

Is the ROYG Zeroing in on Yemeni Zaydis?

[1](#)3. (C) Many in academic and opposition circles contend that Saleh's most recent attacks on his critics have focused in on those members of the opposition who also happen to be Zaydis (ref. c). Intellectuals repeatedly point out several examples to substantiate their claims. In his May speech to a joint session of Parliament and the Shura Council, Saleh publicly accused two relatively minor political parties, the Union of Popular Forces (UPF) and Al-Haq, of directly supporting the "Shabab" and being part of a military wing intent on overthrowing the regime. Saleh's statement was immediately met with skepticism by local observers, noting that the two parties are irrelevant, have no seats in Parliament and are remarkable only for being identified with prominent Zaydi and Hashemite families. Slain rebel leader and founder of the "Shabab" movement, Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi (ref A), was a founding member of Al-Haq before defecting to the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party and being elected a Member of Parliament. He was also a member of a prominent Zaydi Hashemite family

[1](#)4. (C) Sanaa University Professor and member of the UPF party leadership, Abdul Malik al-Mutawakil, who is Zaydi, reported that the UPF's party headquarters were stormed immediately following Saleh's speech. Mutawakil said the building was taken over by the party's own security guards, likely under the orders of the Political Security Organization (PSO). UPF has been unable to regain control of the building from the guard force.

[1](#)5. (C) In addition, Khalid al-Anisi, an attorney with the Sanaa based HOOD National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedoms, noted that the ROYG has closed "hundreds" of religious centers and schools, re-assigned Imams that it feels adhere to the "Shabab" movement's religious doctrine and is cracking down "wherever they see a challenge." Both Anisi and Mutawakil pointed out that all these actions were overwhelmingly aimed at Zaydis and alleged that hundreds of Fundamentalist Sunni schools and Imams are still allowed to openly operate throughout the country. Abdul Majid Fahd, a civil society activist and Saada native, concurs, adding that during his most recent visit to his home governorate he observed that almost all mosques are being rebuilt with money from Saudi Arabia. This, he notes, means that they will only teach Sunni doctrine. (Comment: This is not necessarily good news as Wahabi doctrine is notoriously more conservative than Zaydi doctrine. End Comment).

16. (C) Mutawakil also contends that despite what may be the reality, most Yemenis perceive that ROYG actions target Zaydis. He points to two recent high profile cases as an example: In early May a prominent Zaydi activist, Intisar al-Sayani, was arrested. The ROYG charged that Sayani harbored al-Houthi supporters and stored grenades in her home. She was released, although her son remains incarcerated on the same charges. On May 29, the Special Penal Court for Public Danger sentenced Judge Yahya al-Dalaيمي, a Zayidi judge, to death for conspiring to topple the government and supporting the Shabab movement.

17. (C) UN Advisor to the Ministry of Human Rights, El-Obaid el-Obaid also noted to poloff that a recently leaked study out of the Ministry of Endowment and Guidance (Awqaf) that harshly condemned Zaydi teachings worried many in government circles. (Note: Post has been unable to confirm the existence of such a report, although post did find a report out of the Ministry of Education that noted concern with all fundamentalist schools, including those that taught Sunni doctrine. End Note).

Tensions Among Shi'a Surfacing

18. (C) Currently, a common theme in Yemeni intellectual circles is how much of an effect Saleh's targeted crackdown is having on Zaydis. According to Mutawakil Zaydis are becoming increasingly alarmed by ROYG actions, afraid that the Yemeni population as a whole will begin to discriminate against them. Prominent journalist Said Thabet notes that, "The Yemeni street has a general understanding that the 'Shabab' favor Iranian-style Shi'ism but that the majority of Zaydis do not." He warns, however, that as the Saada situation continues to fester, Zaydis are starting to feel threatened which pushes them to stress their "separate" sense of identity. UN Advisor to the Ministry of Human Rights El-Obaid also points to signs of an emerging sense of identity. "Many people who were not even aware they were Zaydi until Saada, are now becoming anxious about being targeted on that basis," said Obaid.

19. (C) Comment: ROYG insiders report that Saleh is increasingly paranoid about the upcoming Presidential election. With his vision blurred by his second difficult military campaign in a year, Saleh is likely targeting anyone who might possibly threaten his rule. Currently, this would be "Shabab" sympathizers and those from Saada; most of whom happen to be of Zaydi origin. (Ref. A). True or not, perceptions are beginning to color reality in an already volatile situation in the run-up to the 2006 elections. End Comment.

Khoury